


MAKING CHOICES AT THE TABLE

Story By Sarah McCoy

Fast food is not always healthy food.



The most important clue lies in the concept of "serving size."

WITH slogans like "Have it your way," "You deserve a break today," and "It's late, eat more!" today's restaurant commercials draw attention to Americans' fast-paced lives and emphasize the tendency of today's "on-the-go" consumers to eat and run.

"On-the-go" or "fast" food is an easy solution that has become a symbol of American culture — but it's a phenomenon no longer limited to U.S. soil. Many countries around the world now host familiar fast-food restaurant chains selling colorfully wrapped foods. For Americans, whether at home or abroad, the friendly arches and the king's crown offer daily invitations to have a

Former Soldiers intern Sarah McCoy is currently a mass communications major at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Va.

double-sized burger with extra fries.

But fast food is not always healthy food. Many nutritionists wince at the mention of tacos and burgers, believing that anything would be a healthier alternative to what's offered on a fast-food menu.


The fast-food industry is trying to change that image and is focusing on consumers who are looking for low-calorie, low-fat meals. Now, healthier alternatives to the Big Mac and Original Recipe Chicken attract millions of new patrons (and dollars) to drive-through windows.

But confusion also abounds as to what "healthy" really means. With all the diet fads, it's not easy to understand what is better to eat at the drive-

through.

Most readers have seen the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Pyramid: six to 11 servings of grains, two to four servings of fruit, three to five servings of vegetables, two to three of dairy products, two to three meat servings, and limited use of fats, oils and sweets. But how does that relate to the neatly wrapped number-one special at the drive-through?

The most important clue lies in the concept of "serving size."



A best-selling hamburger with medium fries and a cola drink has 1,298 calories, 56 grams of fat, 16 grams of saturated fat, 80 milligrams of cholesterol and 1,490 milligrams of sodium.



A serving does not mean what you serve yourself or are served. By USDA guidelines, a single slice of bread constitutes a serving of grains. Only 10 fries make a complete serving of vegetables, three ounces of lean beef provides a full serving of meat, and one soda drink can contain an entire daily allotment of sugar.

“Quantity intake is the problem ... people are over-eating,” said registered dietician Ruth Linhart of Dewitt Army Hospital, Fort Belvoir, Va. When eating on the go, few people take time to add up their servings or ask the server how many ounces of meat is in their order.

Fat is another issue patrons must keep in mind.

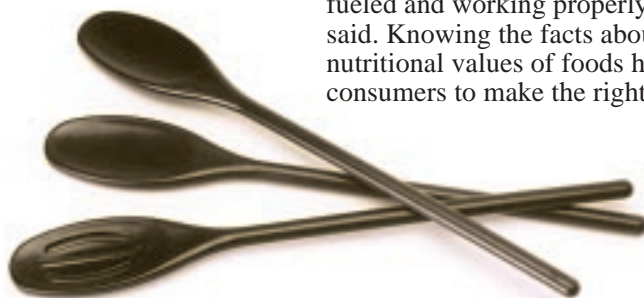
“Not all fat is bad,” Linhart said, “but people need moderation in fat and caloric intake. People can incorporate fast food into their diets as long as they balance their meals.”

There’s nothing wrong with having

a single hamburger, Linhart said, but hamburgers are being “super-sized” and combined with fries and sugary drinks, so balance is thrown completely off. Many fast-food chain have adjusted their menus, offering broiled

chicken, salads, roast beef and yogurt. But the menus at most chains still encourage patrons to “supersize” their orders and add a desert.

Eating is about providing the body with the right combination to keep it fueled and working properly, Linhart said. Knowing the facts about the nutritional values of foods helps consumers to make the right choices. □



THE FAST-FOOD FACTS

FAST-food restaurants are offering healthy alternatives, but most customers still make unhealthy choices, either out of habit or as a matter of taste. Knowing your own nutritional needs may lead you to consider a healthier purchase the next time you place your food order.

The USDA-recommended intake for most women and older adults is 1,600 calories a day. For children, teen girls, active women and most men it is 2,200 calories, and for teen boys and active men it is 2,800 calories.

Based on nutritional information from the most popular restaurants, a best-selling hamburger with medium fries and a cola drink has 1,298 calories, 56 grams of fat, 16 grams of saturated fat, 80 milligrams of cholesterol and 1,490 milligrams of sodium. In calories alone, a woman would have consumed nearly her entire day’s allowance in one meal.

By contrast, the consumer who orders a salad, grilled chicken or roast beef sandwich and unsweetened iced tea or water may consume as little as 550 calories and less than 25 grams of fat.

Drinks are often a big contributor to a person’s calorie and fat intake. A medium cola drink has an average of 280 calories that provide no nutritional value. A small milkshake contains an average of 360 calories and 13 grams of fat. Most restaurants offer low-fat milk, orange juice, water, diet drinks and unsweetened tea, all having less than 160 calories and 5 grams of fat, and some of these choices contain essential vitamins and minerals.

The nutritional listings for each fast-food restaurant can be found at the restaurant location. And you can find the same information online, usually by typing the restaurant’s name and adding a .com suffix. For restaurants with two-word names, eliminate the space between the words and add the .com suffix. — Sarah McCoy



People can incorporate fast food into their diets as long as they balance their meals.”